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# “The Secret Heart” of Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College”

## **Keywords**

Thomas Gray, Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College, British Literature

**“The Secret Heart” of Gray’s “Ode on a Distant  
Prospect of Eton College”**

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Whilst Thomas Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” addresses the changes and constraints encountered in the shift between childhood and adulthood, the ode also confronts the constraints of language and expression itself. The poem focuses on the apparent inadequacy of language, which “skulks behind” (line 64) its more visible themes, such as memory. Language, as a material substance, is inadequate for communication of meaning, and it is this inadequacy that “skulks behind” the physicality of the poem’s words, which show concern

primarily for their own poetic form. Just as the poem superficially conveys how “Shame [...] skulks behind” the youths, who are unaware of the way in which it hovers, waiting for adulthood to make itself known, the inadequacy of language “skulks” beneath the exterior of the poem. Language’s inadequacy is the “the secret heart” (line 67) of Gray’s ode, which “shall tempt to rise” (line 71), until it is revealed. Allusions to the futility of language construct this “secret heart,” as well as an occupation with the meta-linguistic and an interest in the materiality and power of language.

Joseph C. Silterson believes that Gray’s ode “remains without a plot and offers instead only a static contrast, however learned and ironic, between happy ignorant youth and the unhappy wise speaker” (32). However, the ode is not merely “a static contrast” between youth and the speaker but rather a commentary on language itself. It has a self-conscious preoccupation with its own substance. The poem’s language is not “static,” as Silterson suggests. Instead, language is active and “wanders” like “the hoary Thames along/ His silver winding way” (lines 9-10). Language has a purposeful route, and yet digresses and wanders on its journey through the poem. These meanders refer the reader back to the art of writing, prompting a concern for both the inadequacy and the power of language. This “expanse below” (line 6) the thematic surface makes up the self-conscious “secret heart” of the poem. “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” is a hyper-material piece of literature which draws attention to itself as language,

thus becoming a meta-linguistic piece of art. The poem's materiality is "sufficient" as a form of plot and journey. This idea of sufficiency is introduced in the Greek epigraph, which pronounces the importance of adequacy and sufficiency in Gray's examination of language.

The ode's materiality and use of meta-language is therefore the "secret heart," whose pulse can be felt, and yet – like the human heart – it cannot be cut away from the body of the text without removing the pulse of life which beats through it. "If words are made of breath,/ And breath of life" (*Hamlet*. 3.4.195-6 ), then words are life to the "secret heart" of literature. Poets are able to use language to "breathe a second spring" (line 20) into objects, by recreating the familiar and giving it a new life, by doing what Shklovsky described as seeking to "make the stone stony" and to "make objects 'unfamiliar'" (qtd. in Samberger 132).

Indeed, Gray's poems are also "more or less disguised discussions" of language and of the literary. While Meyer Spacks explores the argument that "Gray's poems, public and private, are all more or less disguised discussions of his own sensibility" ("Artful Strife" 67), this statement is insufficient in responding to the concept of language as material and as a form of meta-language. Gray weaves his "sensibility" into his poetry, yet language restricts the extent to which that sensibility can be expressed. The very identity of language therefore limits even the "disguised discussions" of Gray's sensibility, prompting the identification of meta-language as the vital component of his work; meta-language thus becomes "the secret heart" which pulses through "Ode

on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” giving life to the body of the poem.

Even the title of Gray’s ode exemplifies this material preoccupation with language and its apparent futility: the poetic voice cannot address an ode “to” a distant prospect of the college, instead addressing an ode “on” the prospect. The title becomes a form of apostrophe, suggesting that language does not permit direct communication with its subject: instead it is merely a piece of passive commentary. That the prospect is “distant” reveals the incapacity of poetry to reconstruct an object as near and immediate. Language does not have the power to summon the speaker’s experiences of childhood into the present, and so both the poetic voice and the reader must view childhood, and Eton College, from the physical and temporal distance from which the narrative voice looks. The noun *prospect* also indicates that the poetic voice contemplates his subject from only one viewpoint, suggesting that the poem, as a piece of literature, is open to and perhaps dependant on interpretation, as language can be viewed from many prospects.

It is the concern for the meta-linguistic and the futility of language “that inly gnaws the secret heart” (line 67) of the poem. The word *gnaws* gives a reluctance to the phrase, due to the way in which its continuant consonants frame the vowel sound, which forces a pause in the rhythm and pace of the phrase as the reader struggles to pronounce the awkward verb. The phrase’s reluctance reflects the strain required to disclose the “hidden heart” of the ode, drawing the reader’s attention to the way in which the poem’s materiality and

the use of meta-language erodes “inly” and “shall tempt to rise” (line 71). The poetic voice strains to convey his reservations and frustrations at the role and capability of language to communicate. The final stanza proclaims: “To each his sufferings: all are men, / Condemned alike to groan” (lines 91-2), implying that man was created to communicate through language. Therefore, all men must “groan”; they must attempt to communicate through language, as Gray does by writing his “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” in which he constructs a poetic voice. The word *groan* describes the process of communicating through poetry, as a medium of language, demonstrating that poetry is a futile process of attempted expression and is constructed of pain and focused on the self. Poetry is therefore a “murmuring” (line 32) as opposed to a clear articulation, whilst even the distinction between language, poetry and literature is also “murmured” and blurred by language itself. The long vowels ensure that the word *groan* lingers in the palate, producing an onomatopoeic effect. The colon in this phrase is used to cut across the iambic tetrameter used in the first line of each verse, forcing a pause before the phrase “all are men.” The simple monosyllabic structure reduces the pace of the poem and refuses to fit into the chiselled structure of iambs that the reader expects. The way two syllables constrain the word *suffering* before the feminine caesura reflects the way in which the innate desire to “groan” using the medium of language restricts man’s expression. The poetic voice also enhances the stubborn quality of this phrase, which refuses to comply entirely with the verse form.

The word *men* parallels the word *pain*, which substitutes for a rhyming word, indicating that man and pain are synonymous. This absence of rhyme ensures that the poetry, like mankind, “groans” and is not able to harmonise where the similar phonetics of rhyming words would have.

The poetic voice of “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” is fixated on the structure and form of poetry. The “graver hours, that bring constraint / To sweeten liberty” (lines 33-4) exhibit the way in which a schoolboy’s hours of “constraint” in a classroom provide a contrast against which his hours of play are all the sweeter. The enjambement allows for an element of “liberty” in the phrase, which breaks the “constraint” of end-stopping. The poem itself continues to echo this concept of contrasting “constraint” against “liberty,” both thematically—the poetic voice concludes that his memories of childhood are made sweeter by the “constraint” and misery of adulthood—and structurally. The form of a poem brings “constraint/ To sweeten liberty” by condensing thoughts and patterns of rhetoric into the “constraint” of a verse form; the “liberty” of thought that flows through the act of reading is sweetened. This almost suggests a pre-Blakean need for paradox, where “without Contraries is no progression” (Blake 207). This is reflected in the form of “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” where although Gray keeps a constant verse form and rhyme scheme, he manipulates it to match the contrasts in his subjects. Meyer Spacks states that “Gray’s shifts of rhetoric deepen and complicate the meaning of his poem; the ode’s form directly illuminates its content”



(“Statement and Artifice” 527). However, Gray’s ode does not have such gradual shifts as the critic suggests, instead Gray demonstrates bold adjustments in rhetoric. For example, in the cluster of three stanzas that precede the final verse, as he describes the misery of adulthood, Gray uses a violence of rhythm which reflects the content of the lines. He achieves this by using series of shorter words to stress the iambic structure and by using words with plosive or hard consonants, forcing the reader to spit out fragments of the poetry with a tempestuous zeal, such as “tear it forced to flow” (line 77). Sibilance is also used to haunt the content of these verses, which can be seen in “Shame that skulks behind” (line 64). Here Gray mirrors the content of the line in its form. This is due to the lingering phonetics of “skulks,” which stretches itself over the palate in a brooding, foreboding way, whilst “behind” refuses to comply with the pattern of masculine rhyme, and so it lingers passively, producing a sense of incompleteness which generates an effect of unresolved dread. Therefore, the very structure of the poem itself exhibits the brooding “secret heart” of the poem: a fixation with the concept of meta-language and the poem’s materiality, which “skulks behind” the immediate themes.

A concern for the form and shape of poetry “racks the joints and fires the veins” (line 85) of the poem. The poem’s materiality occupies the poetic voice, which is acutely aware of the ode’s “joints”: he is captivated by the structure of the poetry and the different parts which make up the ode’s body of words as a whole as well as the way in which they interact with one another, fitting together

like “joints” to facilitate movement of thought, cadence, and rhythm. He is also intrigued by the different “veins” of thought, which require an active reader in order to provide a pulse to circulate the different threads of ideas around the body of the poem, uniting each “vein” into a wider form of unity. Allusions to structure are scattered throughout the ode. The opening stanza describes the “antique towers” (line 1) of Eton that “crown the watery glade” (line 2). This could represent language, where words are used like “antique” monuments to ideas: although the poet is architect, he is constrained by a need to use the “antique” building blocks of words which have been formulated over centuries, and so he cannot escape inducing exterior connotations due to the inevitable tangle of intertextuality. Words, perhaps, merely “crown” the “watery glade” of thought, which is too shifting and liquid a substance to communicate itself, and so a reliance has developed on language, as the medium of poetry, for communication. This demonstrates a concern for the capacity of language to communicate the vast depths of “watery” thought or sentiment.

“Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” also engages with the power of language: the substance which provides the heartbeat of the ode. As the poetic voice considers his prospect of Eton, he feels “gales, that from ye blow” (line 15). A physical breeze blows from the direction of the college, but memories and new perceptions are also being blown like “gales.” Hidden beneath this is the idea that poetry blows “gales” as it induces a sensory response. It also “bestow[s]” (line 16), indicating that literature prompts

creativity in the act of reading. However, these “gales” are only “momentary” (line 16), which undermines the “bliss [they] bestow” (line 16), as the apparent solidity implied through the plosive alliteration is shown to be subject to time. The “weary soul they seem to soothe” (line 18), and yet this line of poetry is governed by the word *seem*, which draws attention to the temporality of both emotion and the effect poetry has upon emotion and thought. As the poetic voice now perceives that children must “snatch a fearful joy” (line 40) before they are exposed to elements such as “Jealousy” (line 66), “Death” (line 83), or “Despair” (line 69), he also perceives that poetry is a violent attempt to “snatch” an essence of the eternal, by creating a literary fragment that will endure beyond his death. The oxymoron of “fearful joy” gently mocks the absurdity of life’s paradoxes between adulthood and youth, experience and memory, and also the futility of language. The power of the language found in Gray’s ode creates “gales that from ye blow”: “gales” that are so forceful that the poem’s “secret heart” ceases to be secret, and instead the poetic voice’s fascination in the substance of language is made explicit.

Whilst considering youth, the poetic voice states that children “hear a voice in every wind” (line 39). Unlike adults, they have the power to hear poetry in all. This suggests that childhood is the climax of creativity, where one is unbound by the reason and experience which seems to restrain adulthood. Nature, in contrast, seems to have not only the capacity to hear, but to speak. The poetic voice entreats “Father Thames” to “Say [...] for thou has seen”

(line 21), reasoning that nature, having observed, has the authority to speak. A poet must be an observer in order to gain the insight required to “say” and to have power to his words. Nature’s form of speech, which is unhindered by words, has greater power to communicate and express than the poet’s, which is of language.

The “secret heart” of Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” is therefore bound up in meta-language. Chris Baldrick states that “criticism is a meta-language about literature” (152). Criticism is thus a medium of language in which language itself is examined, and it is this broader literary viewpoint that is relevant to the “heart” of Gray’s ode. Whilst terms such as meta-drama are common to literary criticism, the narrow reach of such terms allows only a description of, for example, drama about drama. The “secret heart” of Gray’s ode demands a broader definition of meta-language to describe literature about literature, being concerned with its own literariness. The material nature of language thus becomes a form of meta-language.

Baldrick goes on to say that “there is in principle no absolute distinction between criticism and literature” (152): “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” as a piece of literature, is itself a piece of criticism, in which it critiques its own language and the art of writing poetry. However, this “heart” of meta-language and materiality is “secret.” This may be explained by Jacques Derrida, who suggests that “a text is not a text unless it hides from the first comma, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game” (1830). Gray’s ode presents the façade of being

unaware of its own construction, of its own literariness. “Its law and its rules are not, however, harboured in the inaccessibility of a secret,” continues Derrida, “it is simply that they can never be booked” (1830). The “secret heart” of Gray’s poem is, then, accessible, and yet ironically, due to the inadequacy of language to communicate fully, it “can never be booked.”

The way in which “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” continually alludes to its own literariness leads to an irony which is woven throughout the poem. Gray’s ode comments on language and on poetry, and it explores the power of language and literary form. Yet, the inadequacies that the poetic voice sees in language, which “groan” and “murmur” throughout, haunt the poem. Gray is acutely aware of the ode’s materiality, conscious that by using words as a medium to communicate, he encounters “the limits of their little reign” (line 36). Yet, paradoxically, despite this inadequacy, language is used to obscure things to a hyper-material level, allowing subjects to be better understood due to language’s power to become more than itself. The physicality of language both restricts the art of communication and transcends it. Language is seen, in “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” to become more than mere words “beloved in vain” (line 12), instead becoming a powerful force which beats life throughout and beyond the poem’s structure, as its “secret heart.”

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